

## Bodies and Healing in Ayahuasca Ritual Spaces<sup>1</sup>

James C. Taylor

### Song and Smoke

The ceremony begins with whistling, soft if unexpected, a breathy sound that reminds as much of the tobacco smoke it carries along, as it does of song. It is a low sound, penetrating only because of the stillness of the space, a *silbando* that whispers a memory with each note of the breath behind it, and the tiny, almost absent echo from the cup, filled as it is with the brown brew of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine. The echo carries a half-haunting sound in the dark, a dark now broken by the red glow of a *mapacho* cigarette, just as subtly as the whistle breaks the silence.

What I want to do in this paper is ask the perhaps obvious question: what do shamans who work within a particular ayahuasca ritual complex *do*.<sup>2</sup> By this I not only mean to ask questions of particular ritual practices, but also who comes to these shamans, and for what reasons. While certainly most if not all shamanic systems in Amazonia involve healing practices, many also involve other ritual elements related to warfare, hunting, local politics, quasi-priestly activities associated with periodic ritual activities, and other both ‘religious’ and ‘practical’ engagements with both human and other-than-human worlds (Highpine 2012:27-28, Brabec de Mori 2011:28, and Calavia Saéz

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of this paper has been drawn from a chapter of my thesis work (Taylor 2013), written as part of my completion of the requirements for a Master’s degree from the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida. As I note there, I would like again to thank Laurie Taylor, Robin Wright, Tod Swanson, and Mike Heckenberger for their support, challenges, inspirations, insights, and help along the way. I can be reached at [j.cole.taylor@gmail.com](mailto:j.cole.taylor@gmail.com) with any questions or comments.

<sup>2</sup> The ritual complex under discussion here is that found in the Amazonian indigenous and mestizo shamanic traditions located in the geographic region beginning with the Napo River to the north, following downriver toward Iquitos, Peru to the east, and finally back upriver along Ucayali River to the south. For a more extensive elaboration of the historical, geographic, political-economic, and socio-ecological intersections and extents of this tradition, see Taylor 2013.

2011:132, 136). The complex of beliefs and practices described as ‘ayahuasca shamanism’ is distinct from these, in that it is almost entirely oriented toward healing.<sup>3</sup> That is not to suggest that ayahuasca, in all indigenous cultural groups and in all places in Amazonia, is used in ways similar to the complex outlined here. Rather, in the region outlined for this paper, and given the historical conditions that have been part of the spread of this ritual complex throughout this region, ayahuasca shamanism oriented toward the ends of ritual *healing* to the virtual exclusion of other elements. This orientation toward healing draws the relationship to the body in ayahuasca shamanism into a more immediate focus. I would like to suggest that people, regardless of cultural context, look for the help of a healing specialist – whether biomedical, psychological, spiritual, etc. – to find ways of coping with the vulnerabilities of suffering. What must be recognized, in this region of Amazonia as elsewhere, is that the *sources* of suffering are multiple, and any particular event of suffering may well be overdetermined by a constellation of these forces. However, the *site* of suffering, where it is experienced, and where it is susceptible to amelioration, is the body.

I propose, following Beyer (2009:44), that the sucking and vomiting of pathogenic darts; the blowing and fumigation of smoke; the massaging and palpating of the abdomen, throat, legs, arms, chests, and bodies of patients; the auditory pulse of a leaf rattle and the swish and crack of it on heads and shoulders; the scents of powerful perfumes; and the bitter tastes of herbal brews – not to mention the biochemical and spiritual actions of the plants – all act as modes of healing the *body itself*. An ayahuasca shaman may not be able to rewrite the whole history of colonization and political-

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<sup>3</sup> Though to be clear, healing in this context is distinctly bound up with sorcery, envy, and reprisal.

economic exploitation which act as the particular frameworks in the production of many indigenous and mestizo subjectivities of this region. What they are able to do, however, is work on the body – as the site of articulation with these historical, political, and economic pressures – in such a way as to rearrange the lived effects of these to provide for the alleviation, by degree if never in full, of suffering.

In undertaking an analysis of the ayahuasca ritual complex in terms of shamanic action in this region of the Amazon, I suggest that while important, it is easy for the psycho-spiritual experience of the shaman to overwhelm an analysis of ritual healing, especially as this experience intersects with trance states and the ingestion of psychoactive materials, to the exclusion of an analysis of the body of the patient. These altered states and their impact on the body of the ritual practitioner are certainly important and will be engaged with in this paper, but what is no less important, and often overlooked, is the suffering body of the patient him- or herself, its constitution or production, and its somatic-historical agency. In the significant majority of cases, especially within a more indigenous context, the patient does not drink ayahuasca. In the more usual case, the patient does not experience or undergo an alteration of consciousness, so regularly discussed in terms of shamanism. It is here that I depart from Winkelman's "neural ecology" (2000) orientation, insofar as that work tends to discuss alterations of shamanic consciousness in terms of how these alterations can have biophysical effects. For this paper, I am less concerned with whether or how shamanic consciousness alters the biophysical or neurochemical reality of the shaman, than I am with how this produces healing for the suffering body of the patient.

## Of Suffering and Healing

There are two bodies that I wish to take into account when looking at shamanic healing in terms of the ayahuasca shamanism in this region: the body of the shaman and the body of the patient. I propose, following Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997), among others, the idea of the patient as a ‘suffering body’ – a body whose event of suffering has been potentially overdetermined by a constellation of spiritual, physical, historical, economic, and both micro- and macro-political forces. The suffering body, in its modes of experiencing illness, in its moments of manifesting suffering, has specific historical and political import, that can be understood in particular ethnomedical – or cultural in the broadest sense – terms. Framing the patient as a body that suffers in the context of a healing ritual can potentially imply rhetoric prone to the same critiques that one might level against the agency-denying frames of victimhood.<sup>4</sup> It is not my intention to deny human agency either historically or affectively within the space of the experience of suffering. Rather, I would suggest instead that suffering is, in effect, virtually a given of human experience. While all cultural elaboration of suffering both in discourse and bodies is variable both geographically and temporally, the *fact* of suffering as an acknowledgement that things are not as they ought to be, or as we would hope for them to be, is tantamount to a “universal” human reality (Kleinman et. al. 1992:1). To this end, then, the fact and experience of suffering does not degrade the notion of agency, nor does it situate the sufferer as impotent – the healer, as will be explored further on, suffers too, and in many ways can only effect healing to the degree that suffering *is* a common experience between them. Within Taussig's notions of healing and colonial history (1980; 1987) there is extensive elaboration of this idea that suffering is produced not simply by

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Good (2008:10)

somatic pathologies but by the very character of systemic and structural racism, oppression, exploitation, and violence. I contend that much of his insight into the nature of what he describes as ‘folk healing’ in Colombia among indigenous people of Putumayo has marked resonance for the ayahuasca complex of the region under discussion here. Taussig elaborates the idea that the power associated with shamans is in many ways a reflection of the process of colonial ‘othering’ reflected back on itself and out into the wider imaginary (1980; 1987). Coupled with this is the notion that many of the illnesses as they are lived and experienced in the lives of the rural poor are in fact ironic reflections of these same power dynamics in a socio-cultural sense. This is a powerful insight and critique, though I follow Kleinman (1992:189-190)<sup>5</sup> in pointing out that as much as biomedical rationalizations of illness can strip suffering of its densely human experience, so too can descriptions of structural or systemically unjust power dynamics playing themselves out in human lives lead to a sense in which the corporeal and lived phenomena of suffering are abstracted away from the site of individual bodies. It is crucial that the necessary historical contextualization and political critique bound up with suffering does not, in the gravitational pull of its own analytical weight, strip from the human body the experience and expression of suffering.

The suffering body is constituted by the same forces that produce the event of suffering. The body, as such, is disciplined, constituted, oriented, composed, produced, and molded by forces – physical, economic, micro- and macro-political, historical, ecological, spiritual, etc. – that ultimately also produce suffering. The body is constituted by, and finds its modes of action within, these forces and their arrangement. Thus, beyond some critical tipping point – the point at which quotidian suffering becomes

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Beyer (2009:150) for a related analysis.

illness, pathology, soul loss, etc. – it is not possible for the body to free itself from that suffering through ordinary means. The forces it would use to do so are the same ones producing the suffering. To my mind, shamans cannot stop these forces, either – they cannot will them away. The ayahuasca shaman may not have some absolute power over an exploitative economic system, a racist socio-political system, or a colonial history of oppression and exclusion. But, I argue, what an ayahuasca shaman may have the capacity to do is to transform the orientation of particular productive patterns, disciplining forces, in a way that does not just resituate the suffering body in relationship to these forces, but resituates the forces of production *of that body*. This opens up the agency of the somatic and historical body to be able to *play* once again – in both the sense of ‘give’ or ‘space’ between objects, but also in a potentially ludic sense<sup>6</sup> – with these forces, in such a way that they no longer produce, for that body, the same degree or type of suffering. Both the body's orientation to these productive forces and the body's agency in terms of ordering these forces is re-arranged and re-oriented to alleviate suffering.

### **The Transformational Body**

Of the oral literature of the Shipibo-Conibo, Cárdenas Timoteo suggests that “everything transforms, nothing remains static: plants transform into men, men into spirits, spirits into plants, animals, or gods.... The variety of persons and the constant transformation of these, marks the internal dynamics” both of these stories, and their elaboration in daily life (1989:113, my translation). This same sense of transformation can be found in Napo Runa thinking of the *kallari timpu*, or the world-before, which is in many ways still ongoing and present, albeit ‘outside’ of linear time. Beings there are both the plant-or-animal-persons as they were before ceasing to be human, but also already

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Taussig (1987:444, 461) on laughter, mockery, and play in ritual space

bear traits of the plants or animals that they would, in the present world, become.<sup>7</sup> Through plant psychoactives like ayahuasca and *Datura* these worlds – spirit worlds, ‘before worlds’ and the like – are able to be accessed, and the other-than-human persons who reside there may be contacted, engaged with, and brought into social relationships. As Whitten suggests of the Runa *yachaj*, this contacting of other-than-human worlds, and the mediation between worlds of all kinds, is the position of the shaman in many cultures throughout this region, and beyond through much of Amazonia more broadly (2008:61). What becomes apparent through readings of comparative ethnographic material of this region is that mediation between worlds implies, necessarily, the transformation of the mediator in a process of becoming-toward both poles of the mediation. In Reichel-Dolmatoff’s analysis of the shaman-jaguar complex found in much of South American shamanism (1975), the shaman becomes-toward the jaguar and the jaguar-people as a multiplicity, in order to be able to take on this transformational power. But at the same moment the shaman must maintain a becoming-toward the human, working to never abandon the humanity that links him or her to the social world of his human kin. The ability to transform into a jaguar implies, reciprocally, the necessity of transforming once again into a human.

### **A Note on Theory**

I take as my theoretical orientation toward bodies or ‘embodiment’ work by Csordas (1988), Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), Strathern (1996), and Vásquez (2011) among others. I am interested in beginning from an immediate and experiential phenomenology of healing practices of the shamanisms of this region, to understand the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Swanson for the transformation of plant-persons and the relationships of seduction/attraction between these and contemporary Napo Runa persons, specifically for plants as ‘ex-persons’ (2009:63).

body as the “existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1988:5). However, setting this theoretical orientation as a goal, I must admit an inevitable failure, at least of a sort. The ethnographic material here is comparative, and does not consist of a detailed analysis of a particular ceremony or particular bodies, such that this text refers, in a sense, only to other texts. The contradiction of a textual comparative approach that works toward an engagement with embodiment must be at least acknowledged, and though I have spent time in ritual spaces very similar to those described here, I have not done so within the confines of an IRB-approved research program. As such my personal experience can act only as a guide to my thinking, a shaping of the embodied experiences that I have myself witnessed or undergone, as they seem to resonate with the comparative material here. However, I do believe that an orientation toward embodiment can prove key, despite the drawbacks of this particular implementation, as it allows space for insisting on what Csordas describes as “an *indeterminate* objective reality” (1988:38). I highlight the body as both transformational and suffering, attempting to recognize the way in which both bodies and their suffering are produced by the self-same forces, and to suggest that agency in healing may be restored through radical processes of montage and bricolage via the transformational powers of the shamanic healing ritual. This orientation situates my arguments well within a field that would fare poorly, should it be enclosed by a framework insisting on any one, univocal perspective, be that perspective religious, anthropological, historical, political-economic, discursive, or biomedical. In order to open the practices and discourses that are at play within a ritual healing space to multiple perspectives, I follow Scheper-Hughes and Lock’s notions of the ‘mindful body’, especially as they note that:

It is sometimes during the experience of sickness, as in moments of deep trance or sexual transport, that mind and body, self and other become one. Analyses of these events offer a key to understanding the mindful body, as well as the self, social body, and body politic. [Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987:29]

It is the sense in which the body is mindful, is social, and is political, all at once, that most informs my orientation to the body in this paper. The ‘all at once’ of the body is affirmed again by Strathern who, following Csordas, notes “the body itself has to be a unitary concept, not opposed to a principle of mind” (1996:178).

It is implausible to discuss transformational bodies in the anthropology of South American shamanic traditions without invoking ‘Amerindian Perspectivism’ to some degree. My interest in this paper is not to give an overview of this theoretical model – there are many other better sources for this, not the least of which would be Viveiros de Castro’s own work (2002, 2004a, 2004b). Nor is it my intention to level a critique of the theory – this has, too, been done effectively by both Ramos (2012) and Turner (2009). Rather, I am interested in two aspects in particular of this theory, for the sake of comparing where it opens up a more robust understanding of the ethnographic material under discussion, and for where it fails to cleanly intersect with the same. The ethnographic material for the Runa shamans near and around the Napo River, for the mestizo shamans near and around Iquitos, and for the Shipibo-Conibo shamans of the Ucayali River suggests that, when speaking of other-than-human persons, plant-spirits feature just as prominently as animal-spirits. It is my suggestion that the emphasis on ‘predation’ in Amerindian Perspectivism<sup>8</sup> does not always neatly intersect with shamanic understandings of other-than-human worlds in this region, though this does not suggest

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Viveiros de Castro (2002:309)

that it finds no purchase whatsoever. That is not, in and of itself, too damning a critique, as it is relatively simple to find ethnographic details that are unsuited to any more generalized theory. Here, however, I follow Wright (2009) by noting that if, for these groups, the programmatic statement of Amerindian perspectivism is that “the animal is the extra-human prototype of the Other” (Viveiros de Castro 2002:310) in terms of contemplating and contextualizing alterity, then this does not extend clearly to all of the plant-human relationships commonly found in the ethnography. It may be that the ‘late structuralist’ binary of predator-prey to be found in Amerindian perspectivism would benefit from re-consideration in terms of other non-human relationships for this region. If the predatory perspectives of different species are those that arrange the boundaries of alterity, then plant-human relationships that are not bound up with predation complexes do not present a particularly clean ‘fit’ with the theory. It is less that predation, as ‘incorporation of the other’, does not have some resonance in an analysis of human-plant relationships of this region, than it is that the ‘other’ as a category is of uncertain applicability in all cases.<sup>9</sup>

It is not my intention here to present an alternative model for understanding alterity in the cultural region of this thesis, but rather to ask whether or not alterity is the most suitable concept for understanding all human and other-than-human relationships. For many Napo Runa ritual specialists, relationships with plants rely on a fundamental and *shared* humanity, a humanity that exists, if perhaps hidden or latent, as a residue of the ‘world before’ still present in the plants (Swanson N.d.a; Swanson 2009:63). This ‘shared’ or common personhood suggests that, in these relationships, there was never an

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note however that certain plants and trees in the emic discourse of each of these groups can be ‘violent’ toward humans through sorcery and illness. Whether these can be understood as ‘predatory’ relationships is not always certain.

‘other’ to incorporate, but rather a temporal or spiritual rift to overcome. This does, in a sense, agree with the Amerindian perspectivist notion that the “original condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity” (Viveiros de Castro 2002:309), but such a statement must be extended beyond animals to plants, rivers, mountains, and the like in turn.

With this in mind it is possible to highlight that aspect of Amerindian perspectivism that I believe bears most readily on a discussion of bodies in the shamanic systems of this region of Amazonia – transformational bodies, and bodies as clothing.

Viveiros de Castro notes that:

This notion of ‘clothing’ is one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis – spirits, the dead and shamans who assume animal form, beasts that turn into other beasts, humans that are inadvertently turned into animals – an omnipresent process in the ‘highly transformational world’... proposed by Amazonian ontologies. [Viveiros de Castro 2002:308]

Here, again, it is because of that which is *shared* between humans, animals, and spirits that these can transform one into the other, moving between bodies, taking them on or putting them off as if they were clothes. If there is, as Viveiros de Castro suggests, “no ‘spiritual’ change which is not a bodily transformation” (2002:318), then the transformational body of the shaman must be understood not as simply metaphoric, but corporeal. There is of course the contention raised that bodies are not “material organisms”, but rather “bundles of affect and sites of perspective” (Viveiros de Castro 2002:318), though as T. Turner’s critique suggests (2009), I am not wholly convinced that these are not simply alternative perspectives on the same thing. Viveiros de Castro himself in fact presents something similar, when he notes that “bodies ‘are’ souls, just, incidentally, as souls and spirits ‘are’ bodies” (2002:318) – I find this statement compelling, though I would be interested in considering it without the quotation marks.

To take seriously the transformations implied by much of the ethnography of the region engaged with in this investigation, I propose that it may be less important to try to determine if a body is a “material organism” or if it is a “spirit”, than it is to consider that spirit-persons may simply present *different* bodies in different worlds, including the world of ‘mythic’ time. In this way, the body-clothes that the shaman may put on or take off in ritual spaces implies transformation by way of moving between worlds more than it calls into question the corporeality of any given body.

### **The Body-as-Swarm**

It is, in a sense, possible to conceive of shamans within this cultural region as ‘collective’ beings, persons not simply human, nor fully spirit, but in some ways *composed* of spirits. Notable in this case is not that personhood is constructed out of artifacts as described by many authors in Santos-Granero’s *The Occult Life of Things* (2009),<sup>10</sup> but rather that the multiplicity of selves and perceptual orientations or subjectivities that a shaman may lay claim to ultimately *inhabit* him or her.<sup>11</sup> As Beyer suggests, many people in this region of the Amazon “consider the darts and other pathogenic objects in a shaman's phlegm to be autonomous, alive, spirits, sometimes with their own needs and desires, including a desire to kill” (2009:98). Harner, in his work with the Shuar, has noted that shamans are known to ingest magical darts, or *tsentsak*, which are said to be spirit helpers of the shaman, used to both cure illness as well as to cause it (1990:16). As he reports, “Different types of *tsentsak* cause, and are used to cure, different kinds of degrees of illness. The greater variety of these power objects that a shaman has in his body, the greater his ability as a doctor” (Harner 1990:17). What is

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<sup>10</sup> Though this is a fascinating work.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Fausto (2008), Viveiros de Castro (2004a).

notable in this interaction between a shaman and his or her darts, however, is that these darts have both ordinary and non-ordinary aspects, and that these darts are simultaneously objects and spirits, and possessed of their own perspectives, intentions, and inclinations (Harner 1990:17). In fact, the process of mastering the pull of these darts as they, outside of the intentions of the shaman, desire to cause harm, is one of the major projects of becoming a shaman among the Shuar. In this case, these spirits are simultaneously beings or persons with whom the shaman must maintain relationship, but also part of the shaman's self, embedded in his or her body. The shaman in this sense is a multiple being, possessed both *of* and *by* the alternate perspectives and intentionalities contained within him or her.

While Whitten likewise states that these projectiles are housed in the *shungu* ("heart-throat-stomach area") for Runa shamans (2008:60), he also notes the phenomenon of the *bancu* (*banco*) among the Puyo Runa (2008:71), though this title and its associated beliefs are ubiquitous throughout the entire region. In effect, according to Whitten, it is possible for a human shaman to become, in a sense, possessed by the spirits, and even spirit-shamans (2008:71). *Banco*, meaning 'bench', can be understood as a 'seat of the spirits', making the shaman extremely powerful, and very dangerous (Whitten 2008:71). The songs, chants, and actions become those of the spirits, and the shamans from the spirit world. The human shaman becomes a conduit for them, as "he himself knows that the chants are coming from the spirit, and he is now the spirit's vessel and vehicle into the waking world of humans" (Whitten 2008:78). This 'possession' by a spirit introduces yet another intentionality into the body of the shaman, such that the spirit-darts as helpers with their own wills, the shaman him or herself, and the possessing

spirit all come together at the same ‘site’ of ritual power. This ‘site’ of the body is highlighted by its posture, in that sitting is a ritually important act for the Runa. As per Whitten's analysis of sitting/being standing/appearing among the Runa (2008:77-79), the *banco* is, as the seat of the spirits, *present* in a powerful way – unmoveable, firm, grounded, certain – but also present, in the sense of ‘being’ as opposed to simply ‘appearing’ in more than one world, simultaneously. The seated *banco* in an ayahuasca ceremony can be contrasted to the roaming madness that overtakes one with *Datura* use, in order to highlight the manner in which the immediate *presence* of the *banco* states, physically, in a culturally resonant idiom for Runa observers, the multiple-body of this ritual specialist in more than one world. The person of the shaman becomes a kind of multiplicity, more an aggregation of spirits, persons, wills, intentions, and forces than a single unitary consciousness. I suggest that it is just this ‘swarm’<sup>12</sup> that has a kind of resonance with the ways in which the patient him or herself is composed of forces in kind – economic, historical, political, biophysical, and spiritual – all of which exert distinct and often contradictory pressures on the body of the patient.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that it is through montage or bricolage that healing might be effected, as the swarm of the shaman intersects with the multiple-body of the patient.

### **Corporeality – Smoke and Breath**

Where, then, does the transformational body of the shaman make contact with the suffering body of the patient? Through what practices is this transformational capacity brought to bear on corporeal reality in ritual space? Though there are a significant

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Wright (2009:136) for a mythic relationship between ‘swarms’ of bees and the acquisition of *pariká*, the ritual snuff of shamans among the Baniwa.

<sup>13</sup> See Taylor 2013 for an elaboration on how Runa bodies are formed through continuous integration of and interaction with plants, stones, and the earth of the local ecology.

number of ritual healing practices, both common for many forms of Amazonian healing shamanism and those particular to the ayahuasca shamanism of this region, here I am interested in focusing on one in particular: the use of tobacco smoke as a form of powerful breath. According to Beyer, who in turn was referring to work by Métraux, “it is the tobacco smoke that *materializes* breath” (2009:107). I take this to be particularly important, because it is here that the transformational and ‘spiritual’ power of the shaman becomes something physical, materially visible, while retaining an ephemeral and quasi-phantasmal nature. Of *samai*, or powerful breath, Whitten notes that for Runa ritual specialists one’s “*samai* carries with it something of the force of one’s will, *shungu*, and something of the invisible (to humans when awake) yet tangible proof of inner strength” (2008:60). Breath, alone, is considered to be powerful, a carrier of *shungu*, where the phlegm resides, but when materialized and made visible through tobacco smoke, it becomes something more powerful still. Beyer relates both *icaros* and phlegm to the breath, suggesting that these both “converge in the act of *blowing*, which can both cure and kill; and unite in the magical mouth of the shaman, which contains the power and wisdom of the plant spirits” (2009:82). Where darts from the phlegm are blown at enemies, so too is tobacco smoke blown over a patient – the intent, while different for each ritual practice, nevertheless draws from the common ground of breath as a potent ritual substance. The phlegm that is the source of this power is, according to Taussig, a “materialization of yage-derived wisdom. It is matter, knowledge, and power, all in one. It represents the materialization of wisdom-in-action” (1980:240). And if the phlegm holds power, it is more than just a kind of reservoir. The phlegm, as the physical substance of shamanic power (Beyer 2009:81), has a history of its own. Novices acquire

their power from older shamans, who transmit this phlegm from their mouths into the mouths and chests of the initiate (Taussig 1980:239-240; Arévalo 1986:158; Cárdenas Timoteo 1989:208), which suggests that this power has a kind of lineage, a history of the transfer of power from one shaman to another. This is, in fact, made explicit by Langdon (1981:106), who suggests that shamans of the Sibundoy Valley traveled to lowland Ecuador to receive just this *shungu* power of darts and phlegm from Canelos-Quichua shamans, just as did the Shuar shamans with whom Harner worked (1972:119-123). Gaining or increasing power for these groups is a matter of receiving phlegm from more powerful shamans, suggesting that this phlegm is not an a-historical spiritual essence, but rather a substance with a geographic and political history.

### **The Suffering Body**

Bearing afflictions of the body, of the spirit, and of the social network and working through their distressing consequences are the shared existential lot of those whose life is lived at the edge of resistance in local worlds. To this dark side of experience we give the name *suffering*, with all its moral and somatic resonances. Suffering, then, is the result of processes of resistance (routinized or catastrophic) to the lived flow of experience. Suffering itself is both an existential universal of human conditions *and* a form of practical and, therefore, novel experience that undergoes great cultural elaboration in distinctive local worlds.... [Kleinman 1992:174]

### **Social Suffering<sup>14</sup>**

All suffering is, in a sense, social or bound up with the social; and there is therefore suffering that is specifically experienced through, and produced by, social structures and forces. It is because of the social nature of suffering – its interconnection with all aspects of a person's life – that it is available to be alleviated in ritual space. Purely private suffering, if it could be said to exist, would be unreachable from the outside, by specialist or otherwise. Suffering must be expressed, and thereby shared, to

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<sup>14</sup> I borrow the term from the volume by Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997) of the same name.

make it subject to any ritual act, shamanic, psychoanalytic, or biomedical. It is for this reason, I suggest, that a common refrain is found in the analyses of healing that takes place in many shamanic rituals – that, as Cárdenas Timoteo suggests of Shipibo-Conibo ritual healing, it is not “limited to the treatment and disappearance of symptoms and physical signs of suffering... but rather goes beyond, intending to determine the ultimate causes of the illness” (1989:265, my translation). These causes are often social, or even cosmopolitical, in nature (Cárdenas Timoteo 1989:266). Not only are the causes of suffering social, but so too are the acts taken to alleviate it. As Kohn notes of Runa ritual healing, they are never performed “without the presence, at least, of some members of the extended family” (1992:42, my translation). This suggests that insofar as the suffering of one family member affects all the rest, so too must healing effect some positive outcome in a bodily or individual sense, as well as for the family or community more generally. This is because the problems, the causes of suffering, that are in need of healing are, as Taussig states, in the eyes of the ‘patients’ themselves, “economic, political, and social, as well as those of bodily disease” (1980:219). Economic and political forces that cause suffering are never individual, but always experienced and expressed throughout a whole social field.

The problems of “inequality, envy, and fear of magical retaliation” that mark out the experiences of social suffering in this region, as Taussig suggests, no doubt “date from the remote past” (1980:257). However, more central to contemporary livelihoods is his attendant statement that there is “also no doubt that the capitalist economy both creates new forms and intensifies” the extant modes of social discord, suffering, and illness (Taussig 1980:257). As Dobkin de Rios notes of Iquitos, and Belén in particular,

the political-economic structures are systemically racist and classist, where, as she states, migrants from the forest into these urban areas are met with “an iron-like wall of hostility, as class lines crystallized around obvious markers of identification such as skin color” (1972:56-57). While forest and riverine indigenous and mestizo people face similar difficulties, the brutal effects of poverty and exclusion on people’s lives are extremely evident in urban areas like Iquitos. Regularly reported are “feelings of hopelessness, despair, and fatalism” (Dobkin de Rios 1972:57) which bring about “social disorganization, broken homes, abandoned children, and prostitution” among other forms of ‘social’ suffering (Dobkin de Rios 1972:62). In these spaces, what Kleinman describes as ‘local moral worlds’ (1992:172), desire becomes bound up with envy, which is itself virtually always implicated in sorcery. *Pusanga*, or ‘love magic’, here is the only kind of love that endures, according to Dobkin de Rios, creating a bond that cannot be thrown over amidst the vicissitudes of economic struggle or domestic strife (1972:62). In these poverty-bound worlds the presence or absence of a lover is as much or more a question of economic survival as it is romantic entanglement. Here it is important to understand desire, and the ritual acts that are driven from it, in a broader context throughout this region. Desire shapes interactions even between humans and non-humans (Swanson 2009), and seduction plays a pronounced role in the ideology of domination and manipulation. Indeed, Beyer suggests that seduction has a historical component, in that the process of colonization throughout parts of Amazonia make infrequent use of the rhetoric of ‘conquest’, describing the situation more as one of “mutual seduction” (2009:295). He states that the terms of seduction “are compelling – on the one hand, manufactured goods; on the other, sexual magic” (Beyer 2009:295). Seduction and desire

are bound up with manipulation, dominance, and sorcery in ways that imply that the attempt to constrain and modify the behavior of others through ritual means must be understood as part of the same envy and sorcery-as-social-circuitry complex (Taussig 1987:438) that has been so commonly described in the ethnographic literature. It is in these local moral worlds – in the multitude of daily and lived realities of economic need, sexual desire, and the ritual acts taken to engage with these – that the “cultural elaboration of pain” occurs with its diverse “categories, idioms, and modes of experience” (Kleinman et. al. 1992:1).

### **Sorcery and Violence**

As Dobkin de Rios notes of the mestizo communities in Iquitos with whom she worked, “‘why me?’ and not ‘how?’ is the subject of inquiry into disease and all its ramifications”, stating that the concern “is to find out exactly why he, and not someone else, is afflicted by disease” (1972:78). The ‘how’ may be well understood in its material, micro-political, economic, or biomedical details, including by those suffering from the sorcerous act itself. The need, as with the collapse of the Azande granaries of Evans-Pritchard (1976:22), is to look to the complex web of relationships that situate and constitute people, in order to determine that which gives rise to the particular outcomes experienced by individuals, as these relationships act as conduits for the flows of envy, witchcraft, and sorcery. As Heckenberger states of Xinguano communities in Brazil, “Why one person gets sick and recovers while others die... is because they were targeted by some evil force, usually witchcraft” (2004:188). Social notions of reciprocity and egalitarianism, and an understanding of events – perhaps especially unfortunate events – as the outcome of intentional acts taken by other persons, help to open out on ways of

understanding where and how sorcery ‘fits’ within the production of convivial life.

However, as Taussig notes:

To assert, following Evans-Pritchard, that sorcery is invoked... to explain coincidence, is true. But what this illustration also brings out is how stupendously such a formulation flattens our understanding of what their lives are about and what their invocation of sorcery does to what their lives are about. The clarity of the formula is misleading, and powerfully misleading at that. [Taussig 1987:464]

It is not enough to simply understand sorcery and the suffering that it inflicts on particular lives in terms of ‘coincidence’, nor even as a system of ‘social checks and balances’ in the perpetual game of enforced egalitarianism, grounded in a sense of a world of ‘limited good’.<sup>15</sup> In order to understand where sorcery becomes a question of social suffering, it is necessary to look at violence.

Looking closely at violence – and taking seriously the idea that it has specific, culturally sanctioned, meanings – is an anthropological task that must be balanced by both the need to engage with even extreme cultural difference, and the need to avoid representing particular cultural practices in ways which will have negative political or economic effects on the lives of real people. The effort to sidestep addressing violence and its multiple meanings can be bound up with colonialist attitudes to cultural difference, as an attempt to deny or efface what does not offer itself readily for analysis (Whitehead and Wright 2004:1). However, given long histories of dehumanizing portrayals of indigenous Latin Americans, there is also always a pressing need to turn a critical eye to any representations that tend toward sensationalism. Witchcraft and sorcery as forms of violence are authentic and legitimate parts of cosmological, social, and political realities. Though many modes of sorcery do disrupt and even actively work

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beyer (2009:137)

against conviviality and sociality, sorcery cannot be reduced to being in all cases the performance of socially destructive acts. Violence, in some ways, marks “the limit of the cultural order” (Whitehead 2004:9), and thereby plays as much of a role in making sociability possible as acts of conviviality.

As Stewart and Strathern warn, it is necessary not to underplay the centrality of the ways in which ‘talk’, in the forms of rumor and gossip, “themselves may act as a kind of witchcraft” (2004:29). The social and economic effects of rumor and gossip can be just as devastating as physically damaging assault, at least over the long term. Certainly, according to Stewart and Strathern, “words may produce real disasters” (2004:29), for beyond economic, social, and political violence that words may quite readily bring about, the violence of sorcery tends to move along paths already opened by gossip and rumor. The socially vulnerable, who are generally marginalized through this kind of talk, often prove to be the target of sorcery accusations (Santos-Granero 2004:275). This suggests that the mechanisms of sorcery are often arranged around existing political articulations of social life, working outward from the sorcerer to politically vulnerable targets, but also through accusation back inward from the social unit toward particular individuals. However, as Whitehead suggests, what makes sorcery in these cases most troubling is that it is not “just talk” (2002:16), or actions that can be explained simply as a social mode of constraining behavior. The difficulty is that people “actually die in ways consistent” (Whitehead 2002:16) with these modes of assault sorcery. This is reminiscent of the same problem to which Lévi-Strauss sought an answer in his analysis of sorcery’s efficacy in terms of social death (1967).

Sorcery is linked to the dynamics of social suffering where they intersect in violence. Violence as an entry point into cultural analysis resonates throughout much of Whitehead's work. This work is concerned with what he describes as a "poetics of violence" (2002:65), that which is less about "the formal properties of signs, symbols, and rituals – semiotics – but how those signs are performatively used through time – poetics" (Whitehead 2002:2). His purpose in this is how to understand violent acts "as a form of cultural performance" (Whitehead 2004:58), what he describes as "a cultural expression of the most fundamental and complex kind" (Whitehead 2004:68). The reasoning behind such a series of investigations ranges from an absence produced by a common anthropological aversion to such topics (Whitehead 2004:6), to the light it can shine on the production of violence in state societies (Whitehead and Wright 2004:16). The project can be understood as validated on its own terms, however, by attempting to place within culture what is often seen as outside of, or an irruption into, the social. In an interesting harmonic with work on conviviality in indigenous Amazonia (Overing and Passes 2002), the centrality of affect has a marked place in the study of violence. Overing and Passes describe "antisocial affective states (e.g. anger, jealousy, 'fierceness', loneliness)" (2002:xiv). These are resonant with what Whitehead describes as the intensity of "vehemence", which he suggests "may be a widely valid means of interpreting violence" (Whitehead 2004:62). Whitehead invokes Riches' triangle of "victim-perpetrator-observer" (2004:62) as the social-space that ultimately defines and situates the intra-cultural definitions of violence, noting that not all violence is necessarily beholden to the particular emotional state of vehemence. The pertinence of affect to the understanding and interpretation of violence, however, is that it "allows us to

do justice to the gradation in violent acts” (Whitehead 2004:61), which is a necessary link in understanding violence in terms of its broader implications for suffering in an extended social network.

Living well together is not something simply given by particular modes of social organization – it is the outcome of effort, struggle, and the active performance of sociable behavior. It is a task that readily calls to mind the image of Sisyphus, conviviality as an unceasing struggle toward harmony, one that can never be wholly achieved, but cannot be abandoned (Santos-Granero 2002:284). For many indigenous and mestizo cultural groups throughout Amazonia, this is a process that must be carefully monitored, where success is measured “according to its degree of intimacy and informality, and to the extent to which conviviality has been attained” (Overing and Passes 2002:xi-xii). The paradox of the struggle toward this kind of intimate and informal conviviality is that the fecundity of social life is often predicated on the hostile, chaotic, and violent “exterior domains beyond the social” (Overing and Passes 2002:6). Violence, including occult violence, has in some cases a productive capacity toward the generation and maintenance of society, and this productive or at least boundary-making capacity of violence “frequently reveals the nature of violence at work in state societies” (Whitehead and Wright 2004:16). Indeed, Taussig suggests the “magic of production and the production of magic are inseparable” (2010[1980]:21), generating ruptures where the conflict between the use-value and exchange-value of production, in Marxist terms, insinuates itself into social life. These ruptures, coming full circle, make the constant struggle to live well together ever more problematic, more prone to discord, breaking along socio-cultural lines in terms of sorcery and sorcery accusation.

## Historical Sorcery

Though an appeal to a lapse in reciprocity is too general to explain sorcery in particular situations, it does provide a background against which to understand specific social actions. Envy, however, has more depth to it than this. Buchillet suggests that among the Desana, both envy and illness are “considered to be the heritage left by the mythical ancestors” which continue to “constitute an ever-present threat” (2004:120). While such a notion can be described in cosmological terms, it is, at the same time, a statement of historical experience. Taussig suggests an image of sorcery as an “*evil wind*”, wherein the “*history of the conquest itself acquires the role of the sorcerer*” (1987:373). In this conception, the historical space of colonial violence itself becomes a “temporal hell located in a fermenting, rotting, organic underground of time” (1987:372), generating of its own accord a permeating miasma of sorcerous malevolence. Envy and sorcery must be understood as more deeply distributed into the ground of social life, providing the ‘outside’ of violence that gives space to the norms of sociability (Heckenberger 2004:179-180).

Among American Indian psychologists, the concepts of “‘historical’ or multigenerational trauma, and ‘historical unresolved grief’” have begun to be investigated as a means to understand the ways in which history may manifest in individual lives as suffering (Good et. al. 2008:5). I suggest that historical grief may be another lens by which to understand this same concept of historical sorcery. In both systems, regardless of the particular nomenclatures, it is a colonial history of exploitation, exclusion, and oppression that acts on the lives of contemporary bodies to cause suffering. History is productive of subjectivities in that history is always a question of power, at micro and macro scales. This is to say that the “history of conquest” or a

“multigenerational trauma” simultaneously play a role in the production of the subjectivities of contemporary indigenous human beings while generating, in the same moment, suffering. As Das et. al. suggest:

As stories are layered upon other stories, the categories of history and myth collapse into each other. Thus spaces become imbued with these mythic qualities, narrations not only representing violence but also reproducing it. [Das et. Al. 2001:7]

These stories provide the opportunity for violence of one era to be “grafted onto memories of another” (Das et. al. 2001:7), such that the suffering experienced by a given body may be a lived echo, present and shocking, of historical trauma. In order to understand historical trauma in Runa terms, however, it is necessary to consider the way in which history is understood and experienced by Runa people.

According to Kohn, for many contemporary Runa living in Ecuador, history “is visible everywhere in the landscape”, though as he cautions “the forest does not provide some objective mirror of political economic circumstances” (2007:125). Indeed, Uzendoski suggests likewise of Ecuadorian Runa, particularly of the Napo River, that both time and space are bound up with cycles of growth, death, and rebirth, and that *allpa*, or the earth itself, is that which “defines temporal and spatial deixis” (Uzendoski et. al. 2012:14). The past is something that, like plant growth, blossoms into the present, which in the passage of time becomes again the ground of the future, which finally is the same *allpa* as the past (Uzendoski et. al. 2012:15). The present continuously arises from and descends back into the earth, the space of both the past and the future as temporal horizons oriented not to a linear sense of chronological permanence, but rather to a sense of organic growth bound up with the lives of plants and the ecological system that situates Runa lives in a sense of place. Uzendoski states that for Napo Runa persons,

“there is no reality that is not part of place”, such that the landscape is the literal ground of one’s “historical and future relatedness” (2012:15). Bodies, then, are born of, live on and with, and return to this same earth in continuous cycles. History is not other than the earth, which is the same ‘body’ of Runa persons. Indeed, of the landscape and history, Uzendoski states that:

the body... is a complex web of spiritual and social relations that extends through the community of people, through history, through individual lives, into the myriad forms and beings of the landscape and the ancestors  
[Uzendoski 2005:201]

This identification of the body, history, and landscape draws more sharply into focus, then, when contemporary resistance to economic policies takes place.

During 2001 a series of indigenous uprisings occurred in Ecuador, situated around the broad resistance to the dollarization of the Ecuadorian economy. The figure of Jumandy, an ancestral hero who led an indigenous assault on the Spanish in 1578 (Uzendoski 2005:147), was invoked as a symbol of indigenous identity and historical agency during the ‘levantamiento’ of 2001 as part of a peaceful resistance in and around the small city of Tena. The citizens of the city who participated in the peaceful resistance, the overwhelming majority of whom were Runa, were attacked by government forces. As Uzendoski notes, the “intense events were something of a collective trauma” (2005:147) for the Runa resistance activists, who recognized that money with white men on it was not money for them. They stated that dollars simply spent too quickly, and that they did not provide sound economic material upon which people could build lives (Uzendoski 2005:147-148). The echo of the historical trauma of which Jumandy’s resistance reminds during the sixteenth century found ample, if no less terrible, resonance in the violence of 2001. It is only in context with the understanding of history as literally within and of the

earth, the living place itself, and of Runa bodies and subjectivities as formed from this same earth, that the figure of Jumandy can be understood as an ancestor who was and still is present. The resistance he represents does not just have a metaphoric and historic parallel to more recent events, but is in some ways bound up in the same earth, with the same bodies, who have grown, lived, died, and been reborn from the same *allpa*.

Historical trauma is expressed and experienced in the body – a body that shares an identity with the *allpa* from which it is sustained, with the earth that is the past-and-future temporal horizon of the body’s own subjectivity. But this is not the only reading of historical sorcery, or at least one that is potentially incomplete. The performance of healing in colonial and neocolonial spaces of exclusion and marginalization must also be integrated into the account. In what Taussig describes as a “surprising irony of history”, the ritual specialists of this region are “called upon to reelaborate the culture of the colonizer by the colonizers themselves” (1980:221), in healing ceremonies that are performed for the benefit of both white and urban mestizos who seek out indigenous healers. The irony, as Taussig describes it, is that this capacity to heal, this “magical power”, is attributed to indigenous healers by way of the colonizer’s projection onto them of “tamed savagery” (1987:441). The source of this ‘magic’ is a quasi-psychoanalytic ‘transference’ in the discourse of suffering. According to Taussig:

the power of the ritual itself then proceeds to do its work and play through splintering and decompressing structures and cracking open meanings. In the most crucial sense, savagery has not been tamed – and therein lies the magic of colonial healing through the figure of the ‘Indian’. [Taussig 1987:441]

By representing a counter pole of ‘irrationality’ and ‘wildness’ as the ‘Indian’ to that of the ‘reason’ and ‘civilization’ of the colonizer – features so “essential to colonial hegemony” (Taussig 1980:251) – the figure of the ‘Indian’ healer, by way of this

transgressive status, “becomes the means by which the colonizer seeks release from the civilization which assails him” (Taussig 1980:251). Indeed, according to Taussig’s analysis, for all the ethnocentric and racist ideologies that the patient-colonizer may bring to bear, it is not the patient who doubts the reality of the magical world and its powers described by the ‘Indian’ healer. Instead, it is “the Indians who are called upon to provide magical power to blunt the evils of inequality in the rest of society” who have the most substantial uncertainty about the reality of these powers, of the ‘magic’ they wield (1987:446). Here there is a second troubling reading of historical sorcery – not just the malevolence left by the history of colonial exploitation and violence, but also the ‘occult’ power, the ‘magic’ of healing sought out and even forced upon the ‘Indian’. This power can be understood as brought about and manifested by way of continuing political-economic inequalities and injustices, a healing magic that, while perhaps often effective, rises ephemeral, like mist, as much from racism and exclusion as it does from indigenous tradition. Brabec de Mori notes that many Shipibo-Conibo people resist the contemporary imagery of ‘ayahuasca shaman’ that drapes them in *kene* design-covered *cushmas* to facilitate the mystic vision of ancient healing (2011:44). Such resistance is not unique to the Shipibo-Conibo, as Taussig suggests that Putumayo shamans likewise shake off the “heroic mold” into which they are pressed (1987:444). Indeed, he states instead that “their place is to bide time and exude bawdy vitality and good sharp sense by striking out in a chaotic zigzag fashion between laughter and death” where they, time and again in ritual healing, construct and break down “a dramatic space layered between these two poles” (Taussig 1987:444).

### The Space of Encounter in Ritual Healing

The hum, or whistle, of the two tones is the sound analog of swinging from side to side; each brings the Runa world and mythic time-space into the same cosmic dimension with known history and the spirit domains. With ancient and contemporary now one, and with a unity of history and 'now,' don Rodrigo has taken the steps necessary to establish a force field around himself and his Amazonian water turtle seat of power; he again begins to sing. [Whitten 2008:78]

#### Song and the Suffering of the Shaman

Ritual begins with song and smoke – both manifestations of powerful breath, a materialization of power moving across the boundaries of one world and into another. As Whitten notes, for the *bancu*, though all in attendance see the physical form of the human shaman still singing, both the shaman and the attendees know that “the chants are coming from the spirit, and he is now the spirit’s vessel and vehicle into the waking world of humans”, as song becomes both the means of, and the gateway to, the performance of spiritual power (2008:78-79). But this capacity for identification with the spirits does not come easily. Songs are not granted without the suffering of sincerity made manifest through actions of the ritual specialist over long months and years to acquire particular relationships with plants, trees, stones, animals, rivers, and landscapes. Isolation, fasting, the performance of *dietas*, extreme forms of initiation, and other such trials are common throughout much of Amazonia, and this region as well, to build relationships with other-than-human persons, whether the spirits of plants or geographies. Degrees of power, or depths of relationship, are obtained by more or less radical procedures. Among the Shipibo-Conibo, those practitioners working to become *unaya*, a form of healing shaman who makes use of plants and some limited number of spirit helpers, must only avoid certain forms of communal labor or festival. His or her social duties in these are not forgiven, however, and the cost in social capital is not necessarily small (Cárdenas

Timoteo 1989:184). More drastically though, to become a *mueraya* – similar to the Runa *bancu*, a seat of the spirits and one through whom the spirits may act more or less directly on the world – one must remain isolated for months at a time, often more than a few times over the period of years, solitary in the deep forest, alone and without contact, all the time ingesting vast quantities of psychoactive materials (Cárdenas Timoteo 1989:184).

These isolations are not limited to human contact, but also isolation from normal patterns even of sustenance – along with periods of isolation of whatever degree, go periods of fasting, eating very little, and dieting. Dieting in this region is a concept distinct from its connotations in other traditions – it does not imply simply eating less, but abandoning entire types of culturally meaningful foods (peppers, salt, *chicha* or manioc beer, most meats but a few small fish). The body of the dieter begins to transform during isolation, becoming thinner, less substantive in a corporeal sense.<sup>16</sup> Tobacco water and ayahuasca are often drunk in large doses, but along with these more powerful plant teachers, individual plants with whom a shaman would make contact or build relationship are often ‘dietet’. Bits of the plant are ingested, drunk as cold extracts, and the plant is meditated on for days or weeks on end, to come to know it and its spirit more fully. This process can be returned to throughout the shaman’s life and practice, to deepen one’s insight or to build new relationships. As Cárdenas Timoteo suggests, these activities work as “preparation of the body and of the mind, in order to establish communication with supernatural forces, especially with the *ivo* of the plants and trees” (1989:188, my translation). The Piro reside upriver from the Alto Ucayali, in the Bajo Urubamba region

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Cárdenas Timoteo (1989:184-188), Beyer (2009:56, 94), Luna (1984:145) for more thorough treatments of *dietas* in the shamanic traditions of this region.

and share a number of cultural features with the Shipibo-Conibo. Piro shamans are drawn to their occupation due to compassion: either the death of a child, or the fear of the death of a child, emotionally plagues the shaman such that the he or she, through a transformation of his or her own sense of sorrow, chooses to work to prevent others from experiencing the same emotional state. As Gow suggests, “shamans cure because they ‘compassionate’ their patients” (2002:58). It is the suffering of the shaman and the compassion this evokes – his or her desire to transform that suffering – that makes intercession between the patient and other worlds possible at all, acting as a shared ground between bodies. But it is not just between worlds that the shaman moves – it is on the “razor’s edge between life and death” that the healer must continuously walk. The act of healing is never done only for the benefit of the patient: “in healing others, he is also healing himself” (Taussig 1980:255). Taussig suggests that to become a healer in this region of Amazonia is not just to take on an altruistic social role, but produces a need felt in the body – of shamans, he states “they need to heal in the same way as other people need to eat” (1980:255).

In long isolations, the weeks or months of *dieta* to know a plant, to build a relationship with its spirit, the song comes. “The icaro”, as Beyer states, “is given to the shaman by the spirits of the plants and animals”, for indeed, one “cannot enter the world of spirits while remaining silent” (2009:63). It is in the interpenetration of this music as it moves between ethereal spheres and irreverent laughter that the spirits are brought to the spaces of human bodies and woes. As Taussig notes of the yagé spirits singing through the shaman Santiago, “counterpoised to this ‘divine’ speech of song in its eddies and whirlings is his gentle mockery, sexual innuendo, and degrading profanities” (1987:461).

For how else to bring the gods to earth but in song that whispers and dives with the movement of spirits in the room, riding on smoke and cracking with the *schacapa* rattle, then laughing at profanity and a coarse joke, shaking away the unexpected weight and density of visions and spirits clinging to the flesh, laughter coming like rainwater fresh to wash it away and bring back a life that is somewhere between terrified and grateful. It is here and like this that the spirits come through songs to work on the human body, a ritual space opened to sing powers out from the trees and plants and rivers and earth into the flesh and minds of suffering bodies, laughter making these forces so far from human suddenly familiar, the same, us, enough that they intersect, and in such an intersection, transform. “The shaman’s spirit pours forth in breath, and the song is his action on the world”, becoming in this the “medium for the transmission of a voice far greater than his own” (Taussig 1980:267). As Beyer notes, communication “between the shaman and the plants is two-way” (2009:63), the plant spirits communicating back in the song as the shaman sings to them, the same music in whistles and falsetto notes that descend in unexpected and haunting trails down the scale becoming more akin to a path between the shaman and the spirit than an action that either of them perform alone.<sup>17</sup>

If the song is a path, then the semiotics are also sounds in the air, the affective sense that shapes the whole range of sensory perception in an ayahuasca ceremony.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, as Beyer suggests, “abstraction from conceptual meaning is a key feature of mestizo shamanic music” often becoming refined into “*silbando*, breathy and almost

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<sup>17</sup> See Lagrou (2009) on *kene* designs, and songs that are designs in kind, among the Cashinahua as paths to the spirits.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to be clear here that the songs referenced in this section are *icaros*, or songs particularly related to ayahuasca shamanism and healing, and not other ritual songs made use of by many indigenous groups in the Amazon. Ritual songs throughout Amazonia are often densely meaningful and highly metaphoric, working on multiple levels at once, and should not be confused with the particular analysis of song and its relationship to meaning given here.

inaudible whistles” (2009:74). Csordas notes of glossolalia among charismatic Catholics that it “ruptures the world of human meaning, like a wedge forcing an opening in discourse and creating the possibility of creative cultural change” (1988:24). Here in this space new worlds and new possibilities might emerge, unburdened by the heaviness of transporting univocal *meaning* as such across the boundary between realms of human and spirit. Indeed, many *icaros* are sung in languages not known to the patients, and often may be composed of sounds that are similar to indigenous languages of cultural groups external to that of the singing shaman, but are not, on analysis, fully composed words or sentences, but rather phonemes and the like that mimic these. These languages sung within the ritual space are spirit languages, populating a song with what, following Csordas, I would suggest is language, if not semiotically stable language, for the singer.

As he notes:

we are not to treat glossolalia only as a gesture, for we must grant its phenomenological reality *as language* for its users. I would argue, with Merleau-Ponty, that *all language* has this gestural or existential meaning, and that glossolalia by its formal characteristic of eliminating the semantic level of linguistic structure highlights precisely the existential reality of intelligent bodies inhabiting a meaningful world. [Csordas 1988:25]

*Icaros* are not glossolalia, but the consistently reported feature of their sometimes quasi- or meta-linguistic character,<sup>19</sup> not always being populated with words, though with utterances that are near to words, or that may be words unknown to many of the listeners, suggests that like glossolalia of charismatic Catholics, these songs may well bypass the burdens of singular or univocal ‘meaning’, to register as manifestations of transformational power, vibrating in the air, hung thick with *mapacho* smoke. Because

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Brabec de Mori (2011:36) on the common use of Quechua and other languages among Yine *médicos*, but not the use of the mother tongue. See also Beyer (2009:74-76) on *icaros* and ‘strange languages’.

here, as with Benjamin's notion of "true language" (1997:159, 165) or "pure speech" (1997:160) approached by the task of the translator, the power of the song goes beyond the intention of codifying a 'message' as such across the boundaries of spirit and human worlds. There is not one single, quantifiable meaning that would survive between worlds of radical disjunction such as these. Rather it is the possibility, as Benjamin suggests of all translation, to evoke an echo of the 'original' in the translation – or perhaps here, with an *icaro*, to cause something of the spirit world and its often radically distinct perspectives to ring harmonically in the body of the sufferer.

### **Ritual Acts and Acts of Healing**

How does a shaman, with ragged gasps of breath coming between wracking sounds of vomit and gagging coughs, suck the historical trauma out of a patient's chest? But perhaps more immediately, how did this become a *virote* dart in the first place? This raises a question of *shungu* and *virotas*.<sup>20</sup> Why is the will, the heart-throat-chest of the shaman, this core of power/knowledge substance in the body, so intimately bound up with the same phlegm and spirit-darts as the ground of sorcery? The oft-cited 'ambivalence' of shamanism and shamanic power in indigenous Latin America may well hold broadly true, but so broadly that it answers little. I propose that it is because the recirculating *samai* – the "vital energy" and life-breath (Uzendoski 2005:33) of the mountains and rivers<sup>21</sup> – in fact rises from an earth in which colonial history has been buried. And this grave, like all graves, can become a womb, where something covered over and abandoned is reborn time and again as that same "evil wind" of historical

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Tournon (1991), Dobkin de Rios (1972:77-78), Beyer (2009:81-88), and Luna (1986:120) for extensive analyses and descriptions of sorcery, spirit darts and their place in the etiology of illness throughout this region.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Uzendoski (2012:33) for *samai* interconnectedness with the landscape.

sorcery. The burial site of colonial history is the same spatio-temporal future-past horizon of the *allpa* from which bodies emerge. Or in terms with which this paper began, the same forces which produce the very subjectivities of indigenous and mestizo persons in this region are those that in combination exert inescapable pressures upon one another in an always overdetermined event of suffering. As Taussig notes:

No doubt inequality, envy, and fear of magical retaliation date from the remote past. But there is also no doubt that the capitalist economy both creates new forms and intensifies the socioeconomic conflicts among the peasantry. [Taussig 1980:257]

And if sorcery is born of the same ground where power and knowledge rise as the breath of the earth, then that breath will inevitably carry, in some form, the capacity for the projection of violence and suffering, there present just beside the “vital energy” of *samai*. A history of colonial violence, economic inequality, political exclusion, extractivist development, and the inevitable periodic failure in the struggle toward conviviality condenses into the thorn of a *chonta* palm. Such a dart is blown along the winds of powerful breath into the hearts, minds, bodies – corporeal, social, and politic<sup>22</sup> – of an enemy, or a friend momentarily on the wrong side of the “vehemence” of violent anger. But here I perhaps tread too closely to Kleinman’s warning of treating suffering in overly structural and systemic terms (1992:189-190), making an inevitability out of a contested experience of suffering and violence. This experience does not give itself over to such an analysis without again presenting as resistance the carnality of bodies and the intractable stubbornness of corporeal persons. The somatic-historical agencies of bodies and persons, and the experience of suffering of which these are the site, cannot be reduced simply to a

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987:29)

nexus of historical, economic, and political forces of subjectivity-production, nor can they escape constitution by the same.

Healing, then, must take place on and in the body, the materialized site of both the expression of structural forces and the simultaneous agentive resistance of, and play with, these. Songs and smoke and the shaking pulse of the leaf rattle – the *huairashina panga* (Oberem 1958:79), or wind-making leaf – each in their way open and purify both bodies and ritual space. As Whitten suggests, the shaman “drinks again” of ayahuasca, and “shakes his leaf bundle to create a spirit wind (*supai waira*), and ‘sees’ snake tongues flickering from its lancet leaves”, drawing in with his whistling the spirits of the forest, the spirits of events and places (2008:70). The spirits aid the shaman, in his or her ayahuasca visions, to find the sources of illness, the ‘flechas’ as spirit arrows and darts that lodge in bodies (Oberem 1958:78). And while it is the spirits and the ayahuasca which may allow the shaman to find these pathogenic objects, it is the body that heals the body – as Uzendoski notes of a Runa healer’s testimony, “the healer’s body does the work, and there is not any real effort involved. The healer intends to heal, so his *aycha*, or flesh, sends out power of its own accord” (Uzendoski 2012:28). The flesh heals the flesh, and where the dart is found, it can be sucked from the patient and taken into the shaman’s “own organism, in order to then go and deposit them below a tree in the forest” (Oberem 1958:79, my translation). Of course darts are not always deposited benignly in a stump or stone and returned to the earth. They may be taken into the body of the shaman as weaponry or defense, or perhaps – and more often – be blown back in retaliation to the source from which they came (Beyer 2009:86). For if sorcery may rise like mist from a putrefying colonial history in the earth, its form as a violent object blown in darts and

spirit arrows does not so easily return to become fecund decay, but is rather likely to circulate as disease and illness through networks of sociality that bind humans and other-than-humans together into relational arrangements that are prone to envy, gossip, and the giving and taking of offense.

There is a Kofan legend that depicts God vomiting, shitting, and crying out in terror, gripped in the throes of an ayahuasca ritual experience, the vine itself the unknown product of his own left hand (Taussig 1987:467). In reference to this Taussig suggests that the insights of ayahuasca ritual space do not pretend to a transcendental exaltation, but rather act as a “profane illumination” which does not bring man to God, but rather “brings the gods to earth”, such that these forces beyond the human – be they divine or political, spiritual or historical – are made subject as “fate to chance, and determinism to active human agency” (1987:467). Singing a design through ayahuasca visions by a Shipibo-Conibo shaman, a complex geometry that is as much sound and song as it is spirit, is blown and sealed with tobacco smoke, into the body of a person, becoming part of that person (Illius 1994:194). In kind with bringing the gods to earth, so too do the sung designs of the Shipibo-Conibo transform spiritual power to a human space of sound and smoke and breath, blown, with a *soplando* of tobacco smoke by the shaman over the head of a patient (Arévalo 1986:154), to permeate the body with spirit-song designs until they remain permanent (Gebhart-Sayer 1986:193). Indeed, it is a sense of synesthesia, as Beyer notes, that draws experience of the spirit world across senses, describing *icaros* in terms such as “‘my painted song,’ ‘my words with those designs,’ or ‘my ringing pattern’” (2009:233). The designs become parts of the body, so fully in fact that illness can be understood as a marring or fouling of a person’s designs, and where kinds of

suffering “are thought to be caused by harmful designs that the shaman must magically unravel and replace with orderly designs” (Beyer 2009:234). By making spirit corporeal through song and breath and design and smoke, not only does power move across the boundaries of worlds, but these same spiritual powers – and concomitant political-historical powers – are, as Taussig suggests, made subject to “chance” and “active human agency” (1987:467). The palpating of bodies, the massage and sucking and blowing of smoke, the sweeping and fanning with the leaf rattle (Tournon 1991) all work to heal the body, both as corporeal flesh, and as the social body and body politic with which it is inextricably bound up, or simply identical.

### **Of Montage and the Body**

To know more about what is within, the shaman must increasingly know more about what is without. The shaman becomes a paradigm builder. He continuously reproduces cultural knowledge, continuously maintains the distance between our culture and other culture, and continuously transcends the boundaries that he enforces by traversing the distances he builds.  
[Whitten 2008:64]

It is this transcending of boundaries from which the shaman draws power necessary to reorient forces, to transform situations, to open up again the agency of the human body, to liberate the suffering body from a static and immobile place, to set it back in motion, to let it work its own generative capacities on the strategic reintegration of these productive forces. To my mind it is less that the power to heal derives wholly from the world of the spirits, than it is that the transformational potential made available to the shaman can be located in the act of crossing boundaries between worlds as such. To cross a boundary is to admit of a way of being that is, at least potentially, not structured by the same forces, not bound by the same absolutes, as any given world, at a cosmological or ‘local moral’ scale. I would suggest that it is the very *possibility* of

moving between worlds that makes available this transformational potential to refigure and reorient the forces that simultaneously produce bodies and suffering in kind. Healing does not take place by bringing together an ideal unification, an enraptured sense in which pain and uncertainty are opiated and finally answered. It is not to a perfect future, and thereby a renunciation of all that has brought about the event of suffering, that healing practice pretends. Rather, it is in the polyphonic and polysemic overdetermination of context, a recognition not of the negate-ability of suffering but more in its transformability by way of image, sound, song, and touch that together create a shifting and unanswerable sense of the holographic- or phantasmic-cum-flesh, where healing occurs between bodies, both of the shaman, the patient, and the humans or other-than-humans present in ritual space.

Montage (Taussig 1987:435) proves necessary as a mode of healing because of the overdetermined nature of suffering.<sup>23</sup> It is necessary to utilize images, references, concepts, and sensations from the domains of different constitutive forces – political-economic, historical, socio-cultural, biophysical, ecological, cosmological, spiritual – in order to access the orientation of those forces in, on, or through the suffering body. The body is indexical for all of these other forces, as it establishes a referential position by or through which they are known and expressed. Because they have an impact on the body – because the body is affected by the arrangement and interplay of these forces – the body is inextricably *part* of the same. That is to say that the body is political, the body is economic, the body is historical, the body is material, the body is spiritual, the body is

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<sup>23</sup> Though here bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966), paradigm manipulation (Whitten 2005), and world-making (Overing 1990) all suggest similar models for drawing diverse elements of multiple worlds together to, in particular moments and for specific ends, reorient perspectives and situations.

ecological. These forces have no field that is not the body, nothing else upon which they could act. I am not reductively arguing that there is no *sui generis* of the mind, the social, the spiritual, what have you. I am rather arguing that the site of intersection, the site of contact in the most literal sense for each of these forces is the body itself – the body as flesh, in a raw sense of carnality. That is why it is the body that must be healed, why it is the body that is the site of suffering. All pain, including emotional pain, is felt in the body. Pain and suffering collapse the boundaries between internal and external states, between mind, body, or spirit, such that whatever utility might be found in recognizing aspects of these as poles of experience in particular cultural or historical contexts that are inextricably bound up with discourse, their fundamental and underlying connection, their sameness, is affirmed in the experience of suffering. This is why spirit darts are sucked out as vile bits of blood, puss, and thorn. This is why soul-loss causes the body to be heavy, lethargic, and dispirited. The site of the body does nothing to reductively suggest that soul-loss or spirit darts are only psycho-cultural somatic expressions and not potentially ‘spiritual’ phenomena at the same moment. What a recognition of the body as the site of suffering and contact between these other forces does is make intelligible why healing, in the shamanic sense, must cover so broad a range of complaint, and why there is such a ‘bound-ness’ between symptoms from seemingly different strata of experience. As Strathern notes, “whatever the context, however, one feature seems to reappear, and that is that healing involves a reframing of experience” (1996:171). Such a reframing makes use of images as well as signs, of sounds as well as meanings, of words that sometimes but not always eclipse their semantic referents. It is what Beyer describes as a “synesthetic cacophony of perfumes, tobacco smoke, whispering, whistling, blowing,

singing, sucking, gagging, the insistent shaking of shacapa leaves” (2009:22-23) where spirit-visions and the songs they give to the shaman – and are simultaneously transformed by – can rearrange the relationships of a person to an envious neighbor, or the relationships of a patient to history. If, as Taussig suggests, the problems that patients “bring to these rites are, in their own eyes, economic, political, and social, as well as those of bodily disease” (1980:219), then so too must the means of healing be able to act on these same forces.

Kleinman suggests that in order to deal with the “complex, collective *grounds* of chronic pain,” we approach understanding “not by insisting on a single ‘objective’ interpretation, but by juxtaposing multiple, positioned, intersubjective perspectives” (1992:191). This approach has of it that necessary multiple nature of montage. Because if healing is a space of mediation, where a specialist operates between worlds, then the act of healing cannot strive after an illusory wholeness, but rather must seek, as of Benjamin’s assertion of translation, to fit together pieces of worlds “just as fragments of a vessel”, which “in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other” (1997:161). It is a space in which images and sounds and smells and physical contact can echo bits of worlds – from mythic time to political history, from social idioms of envy and poverty to eschatological *oraciones* whispered to Catholic saints – and become pieced together, making them all “recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language” (Benjamin 1997:161). It is in the interruptions, in the “illusory order, mocked order, colonial order in the looking glass”, in the “alterations, cracks, displacements, and swerves” of song and laughter, of spirit power dazzling in curling wisps of smoke that healing breaks out,

unexpected (Taussig 1987:441). Like the first soft whistle breaking the silence, the red glow of a cigarette the only light interrupting the dark, so too does healing, unexpected, break into the ritual space performed between transformational and suffering bodies.

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